

Wednesday » February
14 » 2007

CN Rail spill sterilized B.C. river and endangered fish stocks, documents say

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Canadian Press

Monday, November 20, 2006

VANCOUVER (CP) - A toxic spill from a CN Rail car last year ensured a "near complete sterilization" of a large section of B.C.'s Cheakamus River, internal documents show.

Several fish stocks killed in the August 2005 sodium hydroxide spill face the risk of extinction in a river that internal reports and e-mails say will take more than a lifetime to recover.

The documents, obtained by the Canadian Press in a freedom of information request, are from the B.C. Ministry of Environment's assessment of the health of the southern B.C. river in the months after a CN Rail accident.

However, a CN Rail spokesman said the documents are old and don't reflect the current state of the river or fish stocks.

On Aug. 5, 2005, a 114-car train derailed on a twisting section of track along the Squamish River system about 60 kilometres north of Vancouver.

Nine cars derailed, including a tanker carrying 53,140 litres of sodium hydroxide, a corrosive often used for household cleaning products.

The spill wiped out almost every living creature in 17 kilometres of the 70-kilometre-long river.

Experts later estimate'd 500,000 adult and young fish died when the caustic soda pushed the pH level - a measure of acidity - in the river up to 14, more than double what most aquatic organisms can tolerate.

"The mortality is likely as close to 100 per cent as possible," Rob Bell-Irving of Fisheries and Oceans Canada wrote in an e-mail on viewing the river in the hours after the spill.

After reading a report from the Fisheries Ministry, Ray Billings of the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C. sent an e-mail to B.C. Ministry of Environment staff.

"If (report's author) is right about the near complete sterilization of the Cheakamus and the fact there are significant numbers of swim-up steelhead fry emerging with little or no food available, action on the province's part is warranted," he wrote.

A letter sent to CN Rail from the Environment Ministry's Brian Clark assessed the ecological and economic consequences.

"Several unique fish stocks already under stress are now facing a long and tenuous recovery period, with an increased risk of extinction," Clark wrote.

The spill wiped out a lucrative steelhead run, and killed chinook, coho, cottids, lampreys, pink salmon and an early chum salmon run.

The recovery of the steelhead on the Cheakamus is the subject of several reports and e-mails.

"The spill will create some very large holes in future escapements. 2009 and 2010 are a complete loss," Josh Korman of Ecometric Research Inc. wrote in his assessment of steelhead returns.

He noted that even the salmon run in 2025 will be about one quarter of what it would have been without the spill.

Korman said extreme conservation would be needed on the Cheakamus if the salmon run were ever to recover.

"Note that the stock has not fully recovered by the time the youngest of us has kicked the bucket," he stated.

"I can see the headline 'CN robs our children of their steelhead future!'" Korman wrote.

Another Environment Ministry assessment said several other fish species, including rainbow trout, and coho, chinook and pink salmon will be affected through to 2019.

CN Rail is contributing many millions of dollars to the recovery effort, including a \$1.25-million contribution to the Pacific Salmon Foundation to help restore the Cheakamus River system.

CN spokesman Jim Feeny said the reports are dated, and the news has improved on the potential of the fish runs since then.

"Those are estimates done a year ago, before the effects on the populations were fully determined," he said.

"Work is being done to replenish fish populations as quickly, as rapidly as possible and that's what we're concentrating on." Feeny added.

A final report on the Cheakamus Ecosystem Recovery Plan was released this month.

"Recovery efforts underway or proposed are expected to fully or nearly fully mitigate the spill's impacts on key species," the report stated.

"Several strategies have been identified that are expected to accelerate the recovery of the Cheakamus River ecosystem to pre-spill state."

No estimated time frame for the recovery of the devastated fish stocks was mentioned in the report.

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